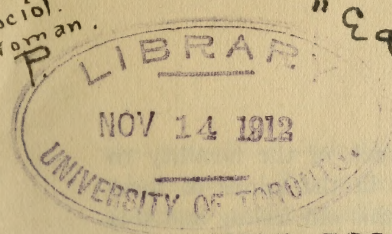


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"Equal Franchise League"



THE POLITICAL DUTIES OF MOTHERS

By ANNIE G. PORRITT, HARTFORD.

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Judging from the objections brought forward by the opponents of woman suffrage, there are yet men and women who have not grasped the enormous change which has of recent years come over the movement for Votes for Women. In its inception, the demand for woman suffrage was based on a conception of woman's rights which most closely concerned the abnormal woman—the woman who, either by choice or through circumstances, was unmarried, and who consequently had to make her own way in the world—to care for her own property, to force her way into some profession, or to earn her daily bread by working for wages. The justice of the demand of the pioneers of the woman movement that such women should not be handicapped by being deprived of political power was conceded by many of the finest men and women who were their contemporaries. It is rare to find nowadays any dissent from the claim that such women should be admitted to the suffrage, and it is the justice of this claim that wrings an unwilling assent from such men as Mr. Roosevelt.

The women whose rights were chiefly in dispute were, however, in a small minority. Their condition to many of them seemed but a transition stage, and the general feeling was that it was not particularly desirable to encourage this type of women. The concession of the ballot, it was felt, would tend to make the normal woman discontented, and to elevate professional life or wage earning above the care of children and the life of the home. It was largely this feeling that, con-

sciously or unconsciously, caused much of the hostility to woman suffrage, and there are still in the minds of some men and women lingering traces of this old feeling and this old view of the demand for Votes for Women.

The newer suffrage movement — the movement of the twentieth century as distinct from the suffrage movement of the nineteenth century — is a movement which has its origin in the home. It is the demand of the normal home-making woman for a chance to do her duty effectually and fully. It is not so much a demand for woman's rights as it is a demand for opportunity that she may perform her duty. It is not a demand put forward for the sake of exceptional or abnormal women; it is a demand of the mother, the wife, the home-maker — of the normal woman doing the work that throughout the ages has been held to be peculiarly the province of womanhood. It is true that the modern suffrage movement, like the earlier movement, is a movement of discontent and dissatisfaction. It is an uprising of the women in the homes against conditions which degrade the home, and make the fulfilment of home duties extremely difficult and sometimes impossible. But it is not a movement of discontent with home life or with home duties in themselves. It does not represent any desire of women to desert the home, and it does not indicate any feeling of antagonism between women and men, or any desire of women to encroach on any department of life which is essentially masculine.

The modern suffragist is far more emphatic than her "anti"-sister in asserting that the place of the women is the home, and that the work and functions of men and women are different. It is upon these two facts that she bases her claim to a vote. The home nowadays cannot be limited to the four walls that enclose the dwelling. A woman cannot be called an efficient home-maker who limits her intelligence and her activities to what goes on within these four walls. The duty of the wife and mother includes the spending of the family income, and the purchase of all those needful things which in olden times were largely produced within

the household — clothing, food, furnishings, utensils and adornments. To perform this duty it is necessary to have a proper understanding of the purchasing power of the dollar, and to perform it fully, a woman ought also to have some control over those governmental activities which can so greatly influence this purchasing power.

It is a safe and easy assertion to say that this country would never have seen its tariff walls raised so high, had the women who buy and consume had an equal weight in the councils of the nation with the men who produce and sell. The making of a tariff looks to a woman like the holding of a court in which only the plaintiff is represented, in which the jury is selected from among the friends and dependants of the plaintiff, and in which the judge and jury never see or hear the defendant, who is precluded from even making an appearance. What wonder that attacks on the defendant's dollar by the plaintiff have been so frequent and so successful! What wonder that the purchasing power of the dollar has been reduced by tariffs of twenty-five per cent, of thirty-five per cent, of fifty per cent, and even one hundred per cent and over, or that the beneficiaries of the tariff have been successful in making the dollar look, to the woman who has to spend it, like thirty cents!

Perhaps this argument may look a little as though it were directed against men — were a setting of the interests of women against the interests of men. This is merely in appearance, not in reality; for the preservation of the purchasing power of the dollar is just as important to the wage and salary earner, as to his wife who does the spending. The difference is that spending has become almost wholly the function of the women, while the business of the men is to earn. So far as government touches the earning power of men, it touches something to which they are keenly alive, and which they will not allow to be injured by the action of the politicians. When government touches the purchasing power of their earnings, it trenches upon the province of the women, and men have not the same alert concern for what is not their own business. A man does not intend to

neglect the interests of his wife and family, which are indeed his own interests; but no man ever showed the same careful watchfulness about his wife's department of activity — a department which he feels that she is amply able to conduct — that he shows about his own. He rests comfortably in the assurance that she will manage all right, overlooking the fact that, though the duty may be laid upon her, the power to perform it is partially withheld. Rising prices affect the woman far more closely than they affect the man; and let women once realize that these rising prices are affected by the action of the government, and that this action can be controlled through the possession of a vote, and they will come over in a body to the suffragist movement, and demand a voice in proceedings that can convert a dollar into fifty or seventy-five cents.

In the winter of 1911-12 there was an extended debate in the United States Senate over the formation of a children's bureau, a bureau for the collection of information concerning child life and all that affects the welfare of children. In this debate it was repeatedly charged by Senator Borah, who comes from the woman suffrage State of Idaho and who had the bill in charge, that Congress had in the past shown much more concern over hogs than over children, and that any merchandisable commodity was of more consequence to the legislators than the welfare of the home. The debate was surely of deep interest for the women in the homes, and it could hardly be said that the woman, who was stirred by it to desire a voice in the matter, was stepping outside her own province and intruding into the domain of men. And yet it was in the debate on this bill that Senator Bailey of Texas declared that good women ought to know nothing of politics. "I believe, and I do not hesitate to declare it," he said, "that the more a woman knows about the things she ought to understand, the less she knows about how we ought to perform our duty here."

Voting in itself is not a special province or function, in the sense that service in the army, in the navy or in the police force is a special function. It is merely a method of choosing

the men who shall make and administer the laws under which men, women and children must live, and whenever these laws especially affect the duties and the sphere of women, it is an invasion of the province of women, for men to pass or administer such laws without consultation, consent or authorization from the section of the community most affected.

It is not, however, the positive side of law-making and administration half so much as the negative side that has brought about the revolt of the home-maker. It is because it is so difficult to get laws passed, to get laws which have found their way on to the statute book enforced — in short to get things done that are vitally necessary for the home, — that women are increasingly demanding the ballot. An unrepresented class is necessarily a neglected class, and more so in a democracy than in a country with a narrowly restricted electorate. The wider the basis of representation, the greater the number of people in possession of the suffrage, the more difficult it is for the unrepresented to make their voices heard over the din of the demands of the voters. The representative naturally listens first to those whose votes put him in his place and whose votes at the next election can cast him out. It is his duty to represent his constituents, and the wider the franchise the greater the tendency to limit the conception of his constituents to the actual voters.

Nor can even a voter hope for attention to all his demands. The pressure in every session of every legislature is tremendous, and under this pressure the concerns of the home, of the women, of the children — concerns which are not put first by any voter, and which have no votes behind them — are almost certain to be crowded out by the concerns of the workshop, the manufactory, the mine, the railway, the corporation, the great financial interests, which men understand and realize so much more vividly because these are matters within their own province. Until women realize that for the accomplishment of their home duties, government action is necessary, and that this action will never be taken — that home concerns will never seem of importance to either legis-

lature or administration — unless there is vote pressure behind it, the homes of America will be neglected, and the duty of the home-maker will be badly done. With a realization of the political nature of many of their home duties, women will become practically a unit in demanding the power to fulfill their responsibilities to their children, their husbands and their homes.

Exactly the same is true of municipal government as of federal and state government. In municipal affairs, the health and life of the women and children in the cities have been continuously sacrificed to business interests. Cities have been run "wide open" with all the risk that such a municipal policy means to the boys and especially to the girls, because the authorities have feared to antagonize some section of their constituents. Tenements unfit for human habitation have been suffered to remain a menace to the health of the whole community, and certain death to many of the unfortunates who are compelled to inhabit them, because property has been of more consequence in the eyes of the city fathers than the lives of the mothers and their children. Building laws and regulations, the laying out of streets, the provision of parks and playgrounds, street cleaning and all other matters of city housekeeping have been done from the point of view, not of the welfare of the woman who spends, or of the children who will be the nation of the future; but solely, or at any rate chiefly, from the point of view of business interests. The result is — a result that would have been impossible had the mother-point of view been of as much importance in city government as the point of view of the business man or of the wage earner — that the modern city is no place for a child. Could there be a more complete indictment of our one-sided civilisation? Half the nation must dwell in cities. The future of the nation depends upon the children of the present, and yet the city is no place for a child! That sole statement in itself justifies the whole suffrage movement.

The mother's duty does not end with the care of her children while they are actually with her in the home. Her loving

care and protection follow them out into the great world. Government takes them from her at a very early age and puts them into school. Economic causes over which she has no control drive her boys and girls into the workshop and the factory, and the mother is forced to look helplessly on at the enormous wastage of child life that characterizes the present generation. Americans are a wasteful nation, but in nothing more wasteful than in the nation's expenditure of girls and women.

The fact that nine-tenths of the working girls of this country do not earn a living wage is the most appalling fact of modern civilisation. Think of it! A girl with fair average intelligence, ability, goodwill and honesty may work ten or eleven hours a day, from Monday morning to Saturday night, and yet all this labor does not suffice to earn for her a wage that will keep her in physical efficiency. The lives of our girls may be devoid of amusement, and of any of the joy of life that belongs by right to the young. The girls may spend not one cent on pleasure, or on the graces of life, and yet at the end of their labor the alternative faces them of a bare meager existence or of vice. "Economic law," says the business man. "The girl is not worth a higher wage, and industry could not afford to pay more." "A sad pity," say the statesmen and politicians, "but nothing can be done. Government cannot control the rates of wages."

Fortunately for them, women have not been brought up with the economic view. It is life which concerns them — life which they have brought into the world and which they have nourished and cherished; and life is to them far more precious than commodities or export trade. "Very well," they would answer the economists and politicians, were they able to speak with authority in the councils of the nation, "the girl is not able to earn a sufficient livelihood, you say. What is to be done? The girls and women are the store-house of the nation's life. Is it really economical to throw millions of them on the scrap heap — ruined for motherhood, either by physical debility, by nervous break-down, or by vice, before they have reached the age of marriage."

The girl is not worth a living wage. If this must be accepted as a fact, it must be fairly faced by all our legislators. It is, in fact, the supreme problem of government, whose first duty it is—a duty enjoined in the opening lines of the United States Constitution—to promote the general welfare of the nation. Is the welfare of the nation promoted by wasting and destroying the lives of its future mothers? If girls are not economically worth their keep, no matter how diligently they labor, the nation, in self-defence, must ensure its own preservation by providing and caring for the girls. It must see that its girls and women are physically healthy, and mentally and morally fit to bring forth a future generation of Americans—a generation that can grow up to be better and more efficient citizens than the Americans of the present. What shall it profit a nation, if it multiply commodities and fail to bring forth men and women, or what shall a nation give in exchange for its babies?

In this age of commercialism and industrialism, as never before in the world's history, government needs the mother's point of view, and no mother is really fulfilling her duty who is unwilling to turn her attention to this great national need. It is the conviction of this need recognized by the men and burnt into the hearts and consciences of the women in all parts of the world, that is rallying men and women—fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, the family and the home—to the standard of Votes for Women.

